

# The University According to Humboldt and the Alternatives

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When Wilhelm von Humboldt reformed the Prussian universities, at the same time he increased the number and enrollment of these universities substantially, yet he also closed the University of Erfurt, which had seen its prime during the Middle Ages and has only been refounded in our days in a second attempt in 1994. In this sense, the University of Erfurt provides a wonderful example to discuss not only Humboldt's reform and the alternatives, but at the same time, in looking at the time before and after Humboldt, we can see the alternatives in terms of first what he had found and found in need of reform, and second which challenges should now be considered also in a comparative perspective.

Currently, we still live in America's century which may be coming to an end; nevertheless, the American example always needs to be considered alongside. Although the university in the sense of a graduate school was imported to the USA from Germany, currently the music clearly plays in the USA as far as advanced scholarship is concerned. The basic American university, however, contrary to the Humboldt ideal has three instead of two functions: education, research, and extension. The extended university is much better networked in its community than the European one, and this has important repercussions for its financial viability.

When the University of Erfurt was refounded, the then chancellor Dr. Helmut Kohl had tried to refound it as a university of foundations. However, the climate for foundations and donations in Germany proved to be still sterile, when once it had thrived. The chancellor succeeded in securing just one chair (my own). This would have been inconceivable for an extended university such as an American one. As university finances continue to be difficult, sometimes outright precarious, it is therefore sensible to think in terms of the extended university also in the European context.

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This paper has a straightforward structure. In starting briefly from the Humboldt reform as such, in part two I look back at the medieval university and then, in part three, I consider the university in its future perspectives also from an international point of view.

## 1

When Humboldt set out with his reforms of higher education, this was of course in the context of all the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic reforms in Prussia, and after the Congress of Vienna, Prussia had re-emerged and enlarged but was also heavily in debt. The University of Erfurt proved to be resistible to any reform attempt and was therefore closed. The privileges of the university were, however, transferred to Breslau, which was along with Königsberg much strengthened. He also founded, of course, the University “Unter den Linden” in Berlin.

The university in the medieval system was before the advent of the national state something like a state within the state. The members of the university, students, and professors, were citizens with their own rights and privileges, the rector and the deans would not only confer degrees, but the rector, for instance, could also legitimize illegitimate children.

Wilhelm von Humboldt was working in the context of an emerging nation state and therefore did away with these peculiar privileges of semi-statehood. Instead, the universities were constructed as public authorities within the civil service but with the specific professorial privileges, freedom of research, and instruction. The students had likewise enjoyed full university system privileges, but now they were users of a public institution (Anstalt) and subject to the bylaws of this institution (Anstaltsordnung). When during the 1960s of the twentieth century students demanded participation rights in the universities, they apparently did not recall they could have much more effectively insisted on their ancient rights instead of demanding something new: “Unter den Talaren Muff von tausend Jahren” (“Under the gowns a thousand years of stuffiness”) was their slogan which revealed ignorance of history.

Importantly, the financial conditions of the universities were also reformed and put on a regular basis. The medieval university had known sometimes bizarre financial conditions. In Erfurt, for instance, you can still see next to the doors of old university professors’ houses a cavity where a broom fits. Here a broom would show when the professor enjoyed the day of brewing. Professors at the University of Erfurt were largely paid in brewing rights, and for this reason it was sensible for them to marry an innkeeper’s daughter. In Jena, on the other hand, which after all is a much more recent university, such privileges were not known. Instead, the professorial household lived on lodging the students who could also use the professor’s library. For this reason, a professor would sensibly marry a professor’s widow who had also inherited her husband’s library; hence, he could not only use the library but also benefit from a well-managed professorial household.

If professors are recruited in this manner for centuries, it can come as no surprise that ultimately the University of Jena would thrive and the University of Erfurt had to be closed. Indeed, when the University of Erfurt was closed, there were twice as many professors there as students, and they tended to be found in their inns rather than the lecturing halls.

Other universities, such as the University of Marburg, had agricultural revenues at their disposal. Philipp of Hesse, the reformer, had simply closed a monastery and turned over its rich estates to the university. The livelihood of the university now depended on agricultural vicissitudes. The professors had certain quantities of wood and wine for their livelihood as well as, of course, the lecture fees.

## 2

The history of the pre-Humboldt university is best divided into two phases, roughly the period before and including Paracelsus, i.e. Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, and the post-reform counter-reformation and counter-counter-reformation universities before Humboldt. While scholarly learning in the Middle Ages had mostly thrived in the monasteries, the universities really began to blossom when the scholars arrived from Constantinople with their libraries and universities were founded in upper Italy. Paracelsus had studied in Perugia and he later became a professor in the city of Basel and not at the university, where he was not tolerated. Paracelsus was a wandering scholar, the founder of scholarly pharmacy and also the founder of a specialized type of medicine devoted to treating work-related injuries and conditions. Labour practices particularly in mining were in such demand that the need for such a specialized practice of medicine was simply undeniable. The advent of the reformation brought a wave of university foundations, often monasteries were transformed into universities lock, stock, and barrel. The University of Marburg provides just such an example. The reformation, of course, was an ongoing process. The University of Erfurt received many professors from Prague, the oldest German university, as the beginning reformation which in Bohemia also was a nationalist movement forced the professors to go elsewhere. Previously, Erfurt primarily had contacts with the Sorbonne. An instrument of reformation was also the University of Groningen in the north of the Netherlands. In the beginning, this university did not have a single Dutch professor, all the professors came from Germany. The reformation also gave rise to the University of Herborn, where Johannes Althusius taught who later became the syndic of Emden, an important port city. In the case of Althusius, religion, public law, and the sciences of state are just one amalgam (Althusius 1995).

The counter-reformation gave rise to university foundations, again, however, under rather different auspices. The University of Würzburg provides a fine example. Here, the professors were explicitly barred from publishing. The city, of course, also has an excellent vineyard, and Lujo Brentano still provides a colorful account of studying there. As he had a girlfriend there, Lujo Brentano had decided to study

in Würzburg, and he tells of a lecture in public finance: “There were three students next to the professor, first one neighbor fell asleep, then the other. When I woke up, the professor was sound asleep” (Brentano 2009).

Sometimes there were even counter-counter-reformations, notably when former church territories due to the Napoleonic reforms and the Congress of Vienna became secular. The most important reforms, however, were those by Friedrich Althoff in the late nineteenth century (Backhaus 1993). This was, of course, a post-Humboldt reform, certainly not less forceful. The empire (Reich) now had 25 constituent states, Prussia was the biggest and the Reichslande (imperial lands) Elsass-Lothringen had the University of Strasbourg. Incidentally, the Althoff reforms comprised the Prussian universities, Strasbourg and also the universities in Baden, as the grand duchy of Baden moved in tandem with Prussia on university affairs.

During Althoff’s administration, the universities in Prussia doubled in terms of number, enrolment and professorial staff. With respect to financial arrangements, Althoff was indeed ingenious. The University of Frankfurt was a university entirely made up of foundations. The same was true for the Emperor William Foundation, a research wing added to the university system. Major donors were count Henkel von Donnersmarck from Silesia and the Rothschild widow.

The University of Frankfurt was also an important outlet for racial pressure. The many Jewish university teachers who could not be accommodated in either Austria or Bavaria found employment there, the same was true for the University of Strasbourg.

As in the case of Georg Simmel, sometimes the family founded a chair to which the appointee would be named. Althoff was also responsible for the creation of entire new disciplines and academic disciplines, for instance business economics. In order to appease the Westphalians (for the loss of their kingdom and being made part of Prussia), the Wilhelms University would be located in Munster. Similarly, a technical university was founded in Aachen, and technical universities also received the *ius promovendi* against stiff opposition from traditional quarters; this is why the doctor in technical sciences is written in German and therefore with a capital “I” (Dr. Ing.). This was the only compromise, otherwise the technical universities were made totally equal to the traditional universities.

The Althoff system had been discussed at a different conference in 1989, which is why we now turn to part III.

### 3

At present, the most pressing demand facing the traditional universities in Germany is the quest for the *ius promovendi* by the universities of applied sciences. Probably, the best that can be done here from the point of view of overall academic performance is to offer little resistance as such but stiff resistance to laxness and negligence in standards.

Althoff introduced a written dissertation, which was then also required in Heidelberg. Consequently, American students who wanted to graduate but could not or did not wish to submit a written dissertation went to Leipzig in Saxony. Likewise, universities of applied sciences should not be allowed to give away the doctorate or grant it for applied work, the doctorate should remain to be reserved for basic research. As this will be initially difficult to master for many but not all professors at universities of applied sciences, those will look for help to professors at universities. Often, professors at universities of applied sciences are actually would-be university professors who could not find an appointment there. With much difficulty, but often the cooperation of the Ministry of Education, the requirements for practical experience can be finessed in such cases, and as far as these professors are concerned, often having passed the requirements for the habilitation (in America second dissertation), the problem is virtually nonexistent.

In the future, the independence of universities and university funding will have to be addressed as the prime objectives of science policy. In this context, we should also note that the right to found private universities and to insist on a license to be granted by the state is really an important precondition for university independence and sanity. Of course, with 16 federal states, there is a modicum of competition between them, and this modicum of competition is, of course, a guarantor for some freedom. But the right of the citizen to enjoy freedom of research and education also extends to the right of founding universities and having them certified when they fulfill nonarbitrary requirements. This is important from the point of view of content of (teaching and research) for both teachers and students, as in the Middle Ages. But it is also important from the point of view of saving universities from financial strangulation with the intent of accomplishing rather material ends. In our time, we witness that a Prime Minister of a German federal state (North Rhine-Westphalia) gave in to popular demands and in one night founded five universities. Although substantial advances were made to fund these universities, what could be accomplished was certainly impressive but probably not enough. Today, we face the bizarre spectacle that one of these universities has been closed, one entire university budget has been struck from the state budget, yet we do not know which university this is, as all five of them still continue to exist—the resistance to closing one down from the local communities proved insurmountable to the state government. Such a situation is obviously not just bizarre, it is testimony to the unsatisfactory situation at which universities exist if they can only rely on the public for funding.

For this reason, in the future we will increasingly have to look for the alternative of a private extended university. Clear enough, the extended university in the American context is typically a public one. One third of the unsettled land (from which mostly Indians were driven) was set aside for the development of churches and universities. These universities would then be located in remote areas, and the land would only increase in value when the establishment thrived. Yet, the American context always allows for exceptions, Cornell, for instance, is a university that is both private and land-grant. The extended university is typically so interwoven with its extension, i.e. whatever extends beyond, that it is next to inconceivable that it would lack the resources for its own development. Agriculture, the neighborhoods

and the cities around it are so dependent on this university as an institution that provides education during the day and in the evening, consultation of all kinds but also facilities such as airports, that the extended university never fails to meet the demand that can also pay for its sustenance. In recent years, many state governments have probed means to grant universities more independence, typically with a view to also loosening their grip on the state's budget. Typically, these are entitlements and the state can do nothing but discourage the use of them. The most drastic but also most helpful way for state governments to grant universities more independence is at the same time a very painless one. It is simply to grant them the ability to find a status as an extended university.

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